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(54) **DYNAMIC PATH CORRECTION OF FRICTION STIR WELDING**

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B23K 20/12 (2006.01)

(52) **U.S. Cl.**
USPC **228/112.1**; 228/113; 228/114; 228/2.1

(58) **Field of Classification Search**
USPC 228/112.1, 113, 114, 2.1
See application file for complete search history.

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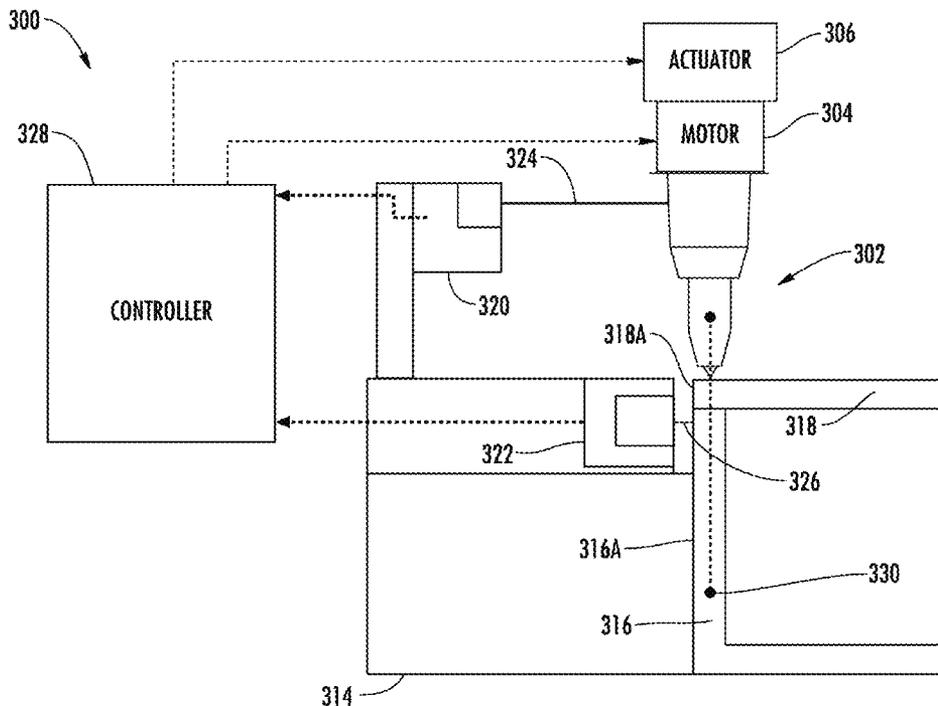
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(57) **ABSTRACT**

A method for controlling friction stir welding is provided. The method may include initiating friction stir welding and determining the position of a friction stir welding tool and at least one part being welded. The method may also include adjusting the position of the friction stir welding tool while friction stir welding based at least in part on the positions of the tool and at least one of the parts. The position of the parts may be determined downstream of the friction stir welding tool in order to prospectively account for the position of the parts. Accordingly, the position of the friction stir welding tool may be dynamically adjusted during friction stir welding to account for part movement. Related systems and computer code are provided.

17 Claims, 12 Drawing Sheets



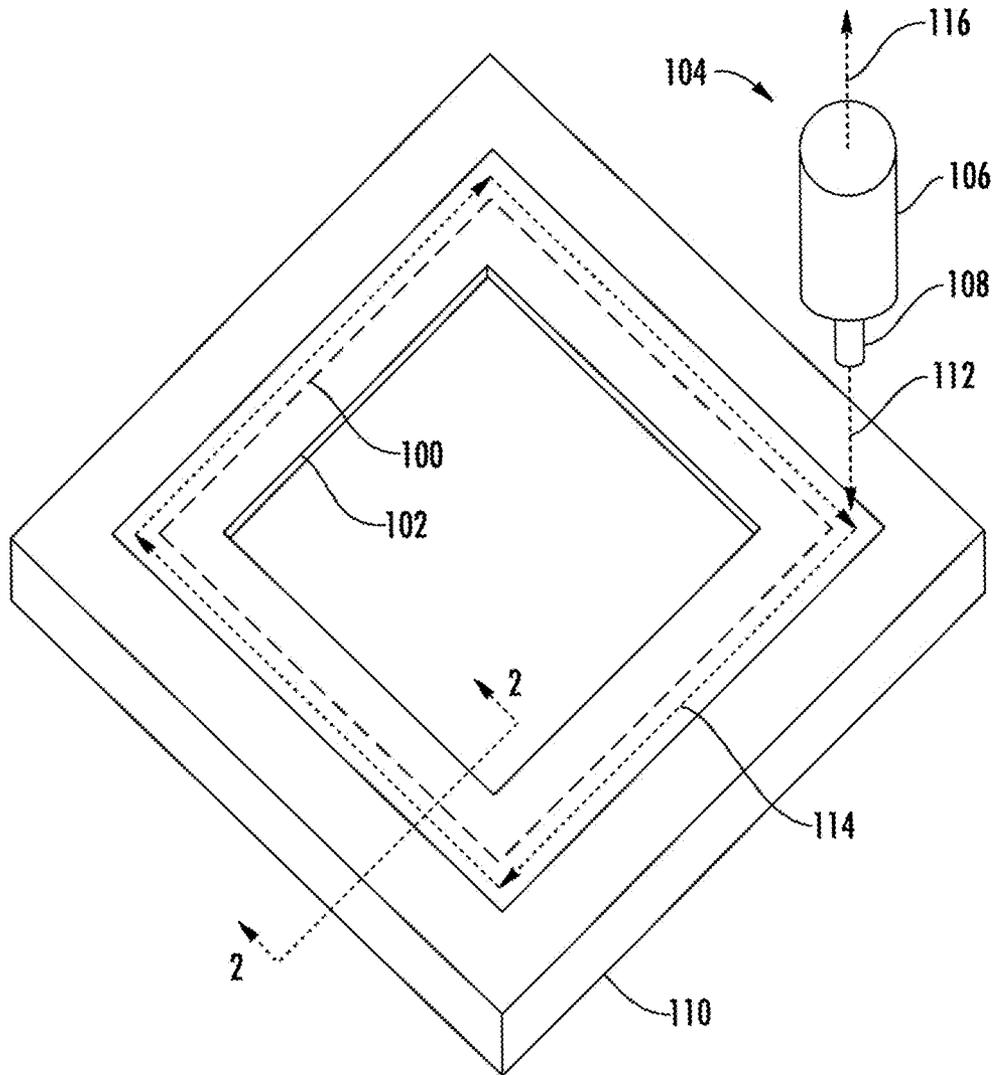


FIG. 1

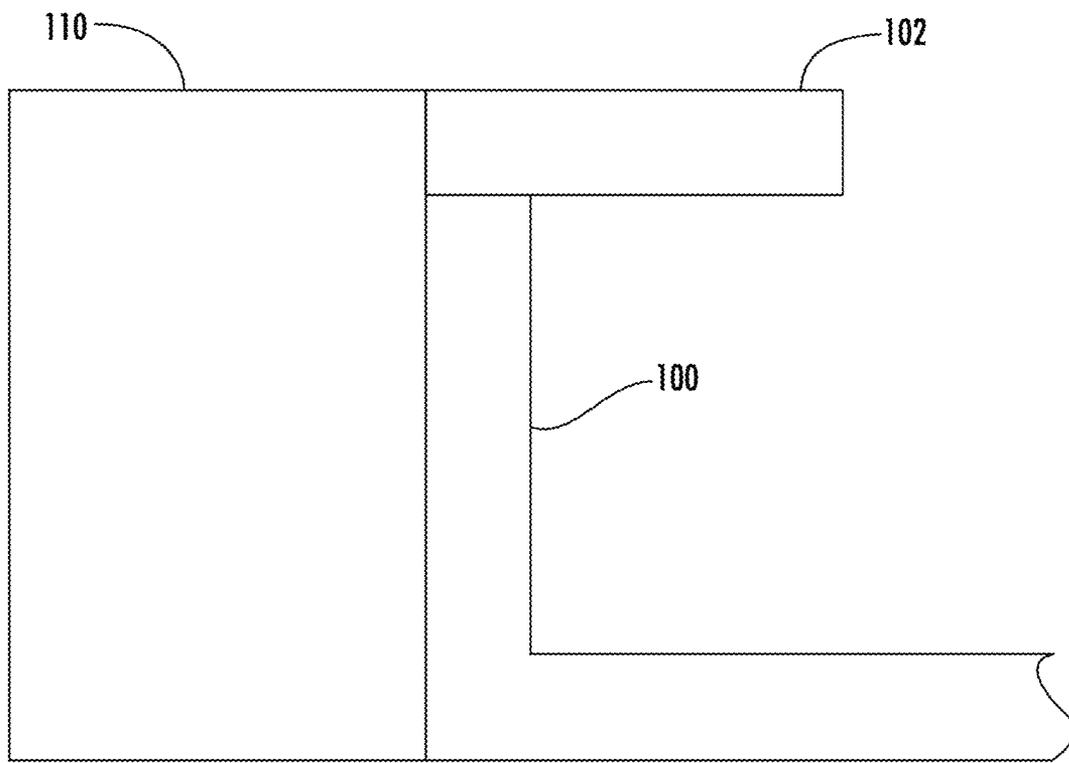


FIG. 2

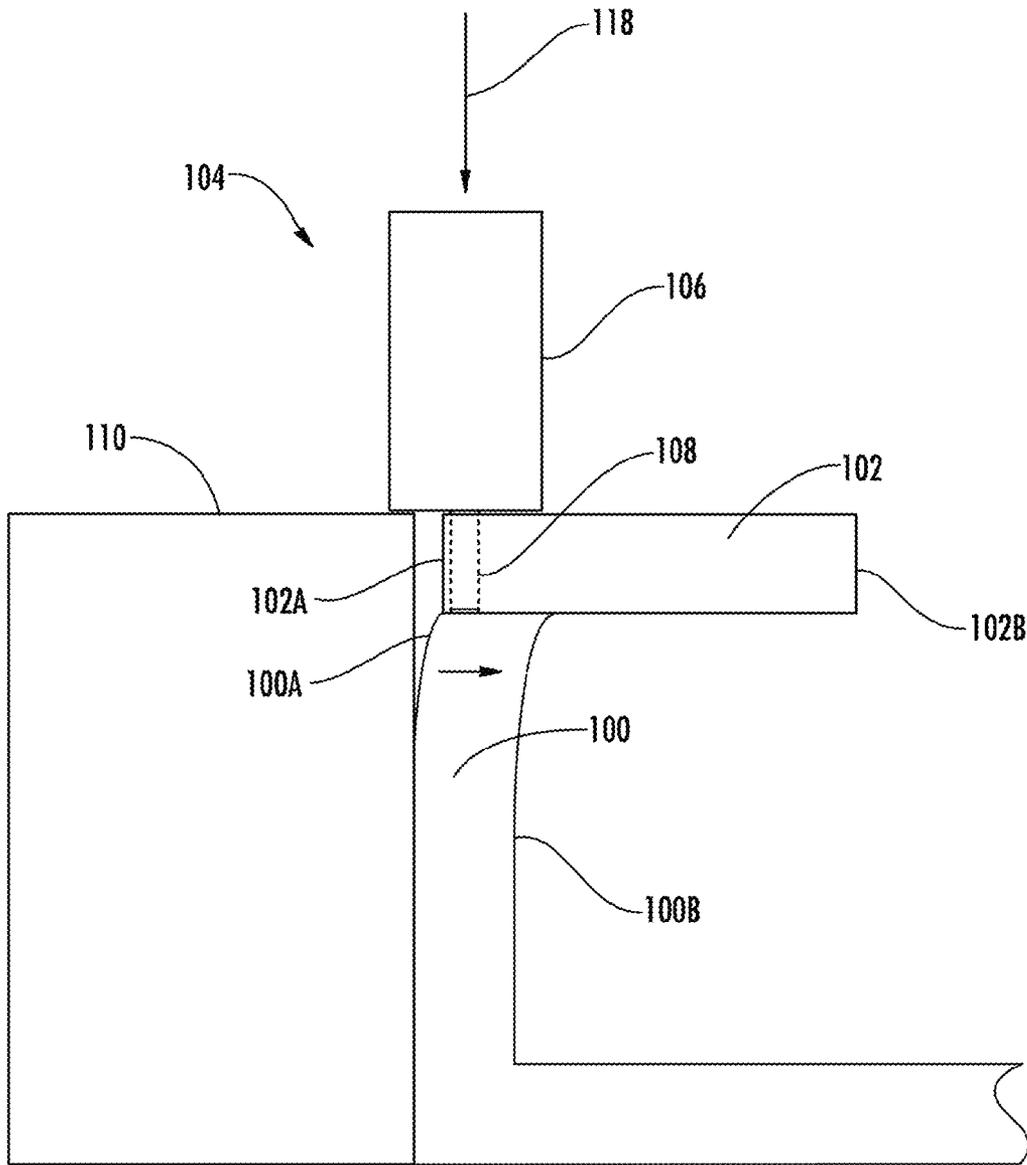


FIG. 3

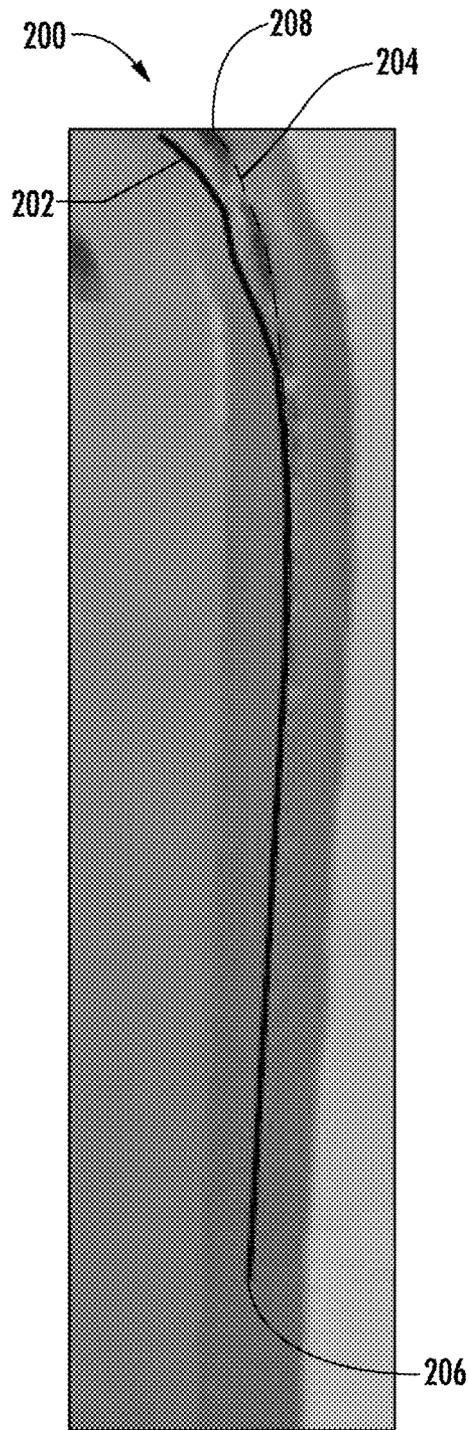


FIG. 4

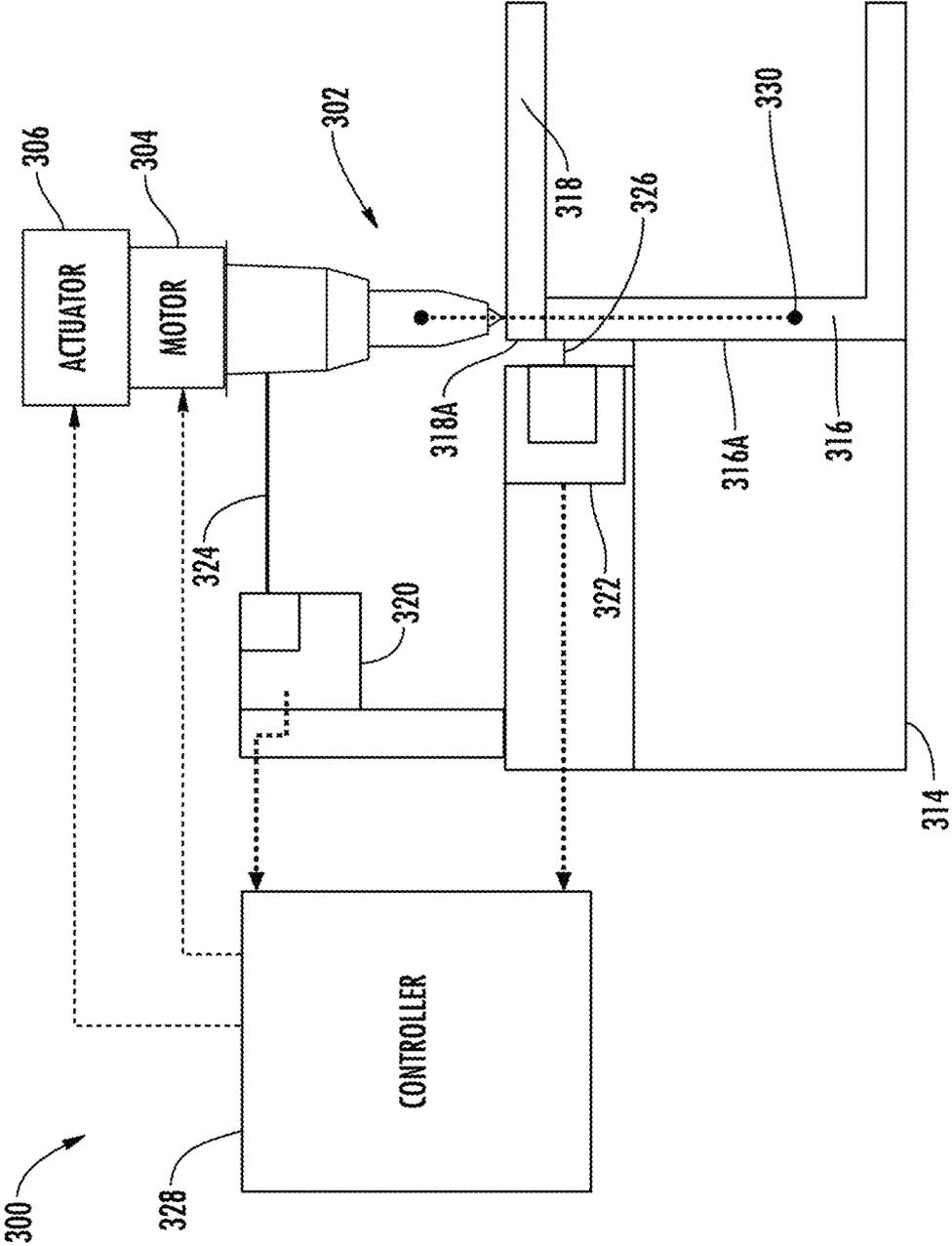


FIG. 5

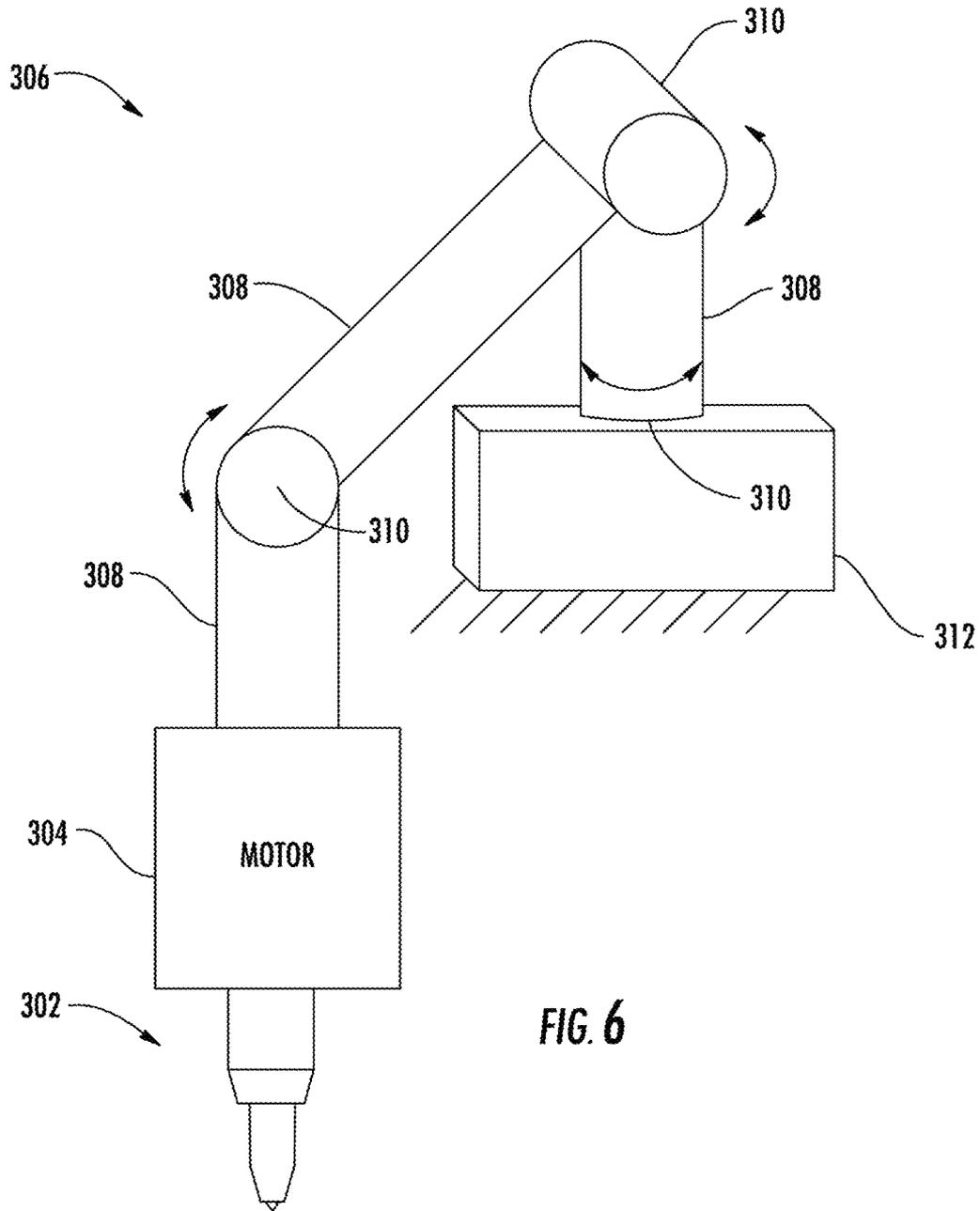


FIG. 6

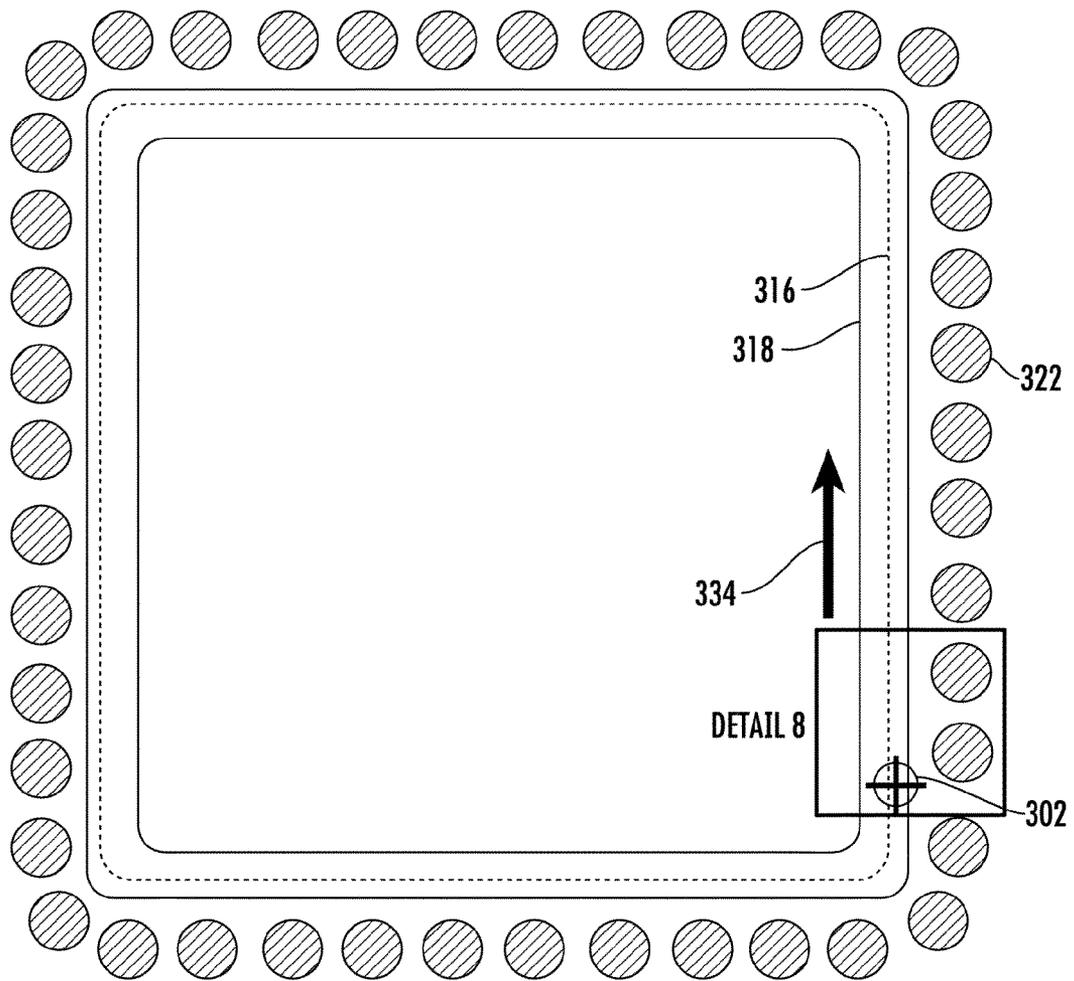


FIG. 7

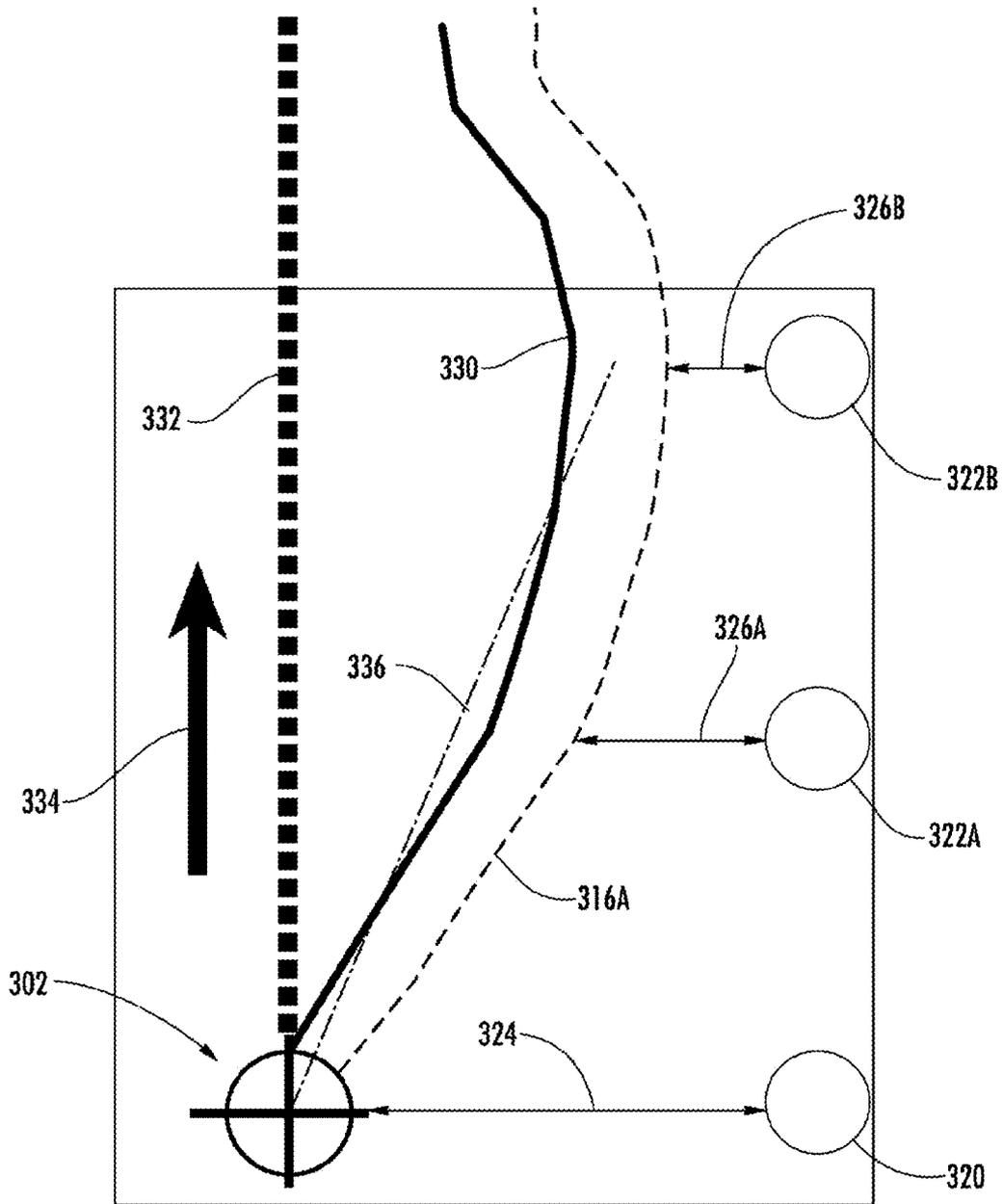


FIG. 8

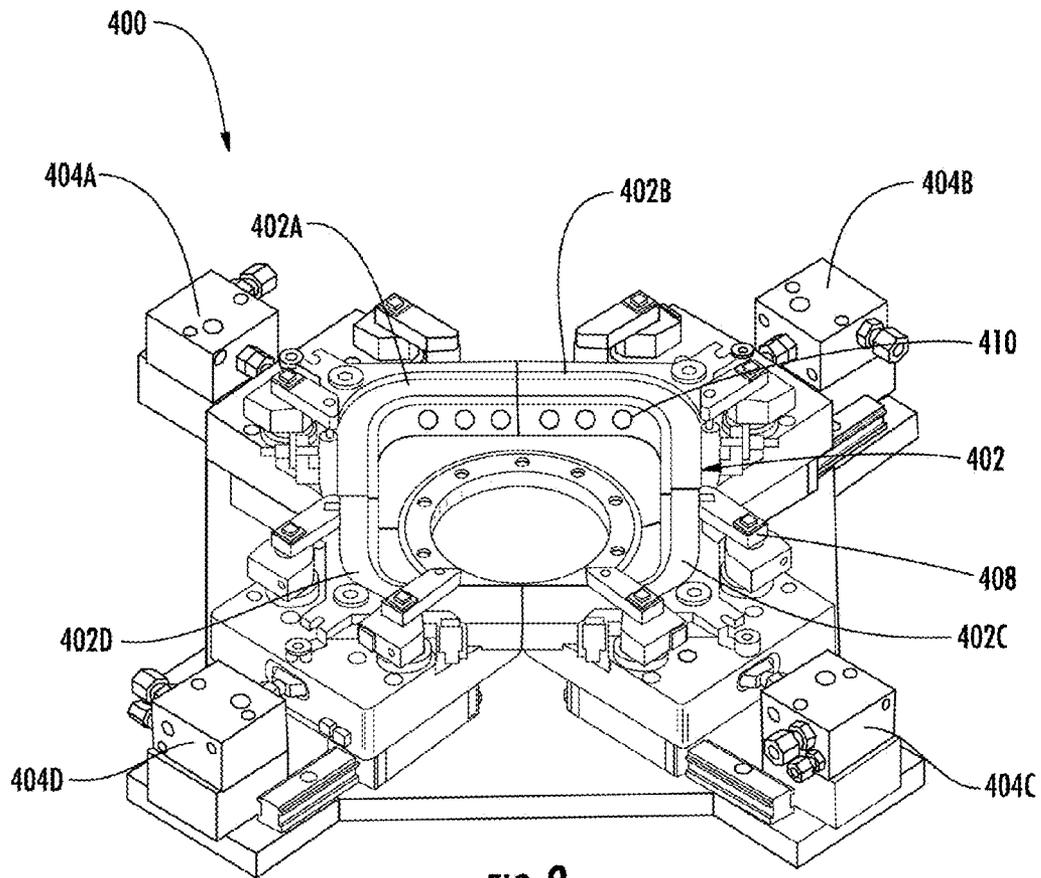


FIG. 9

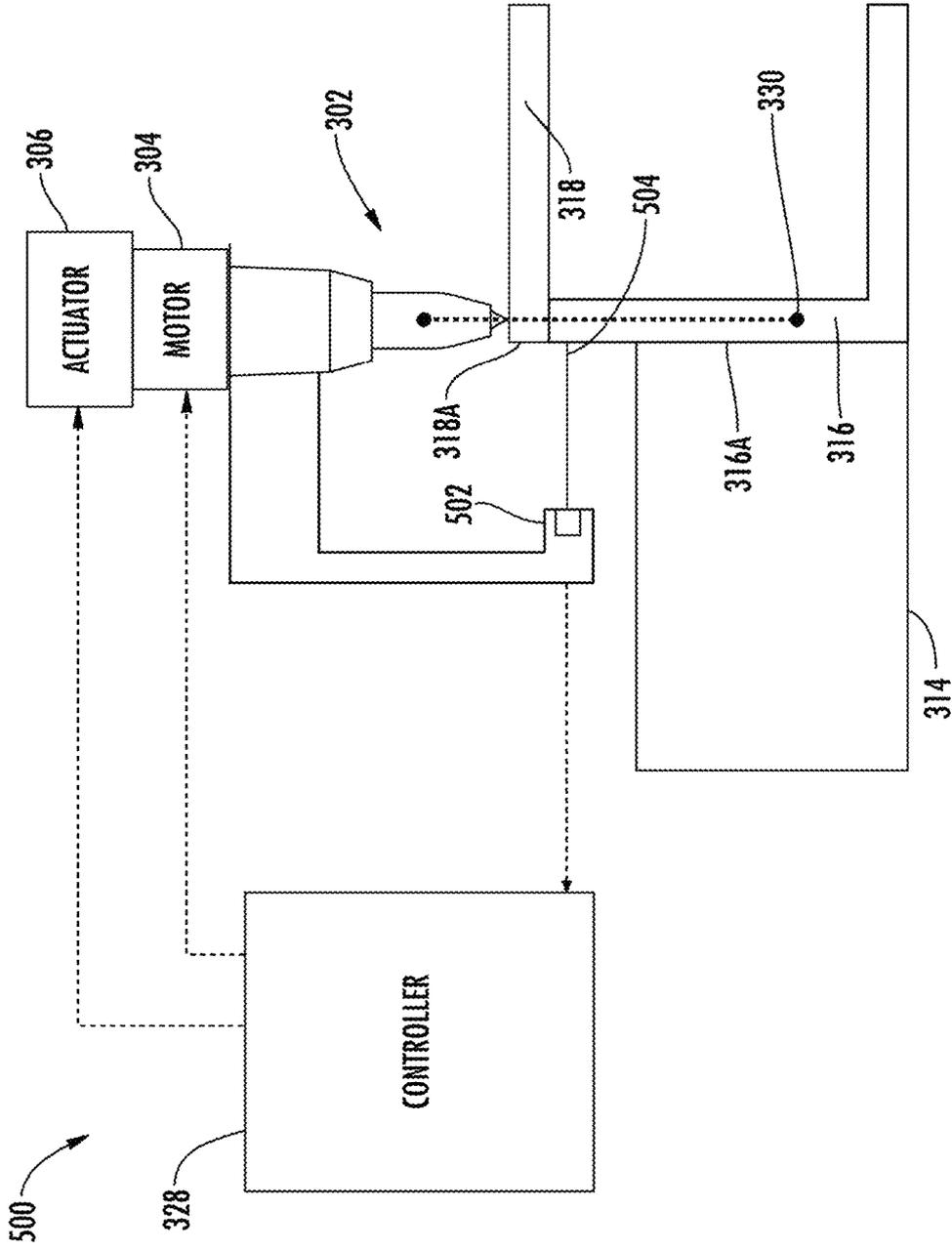


FIG. 10

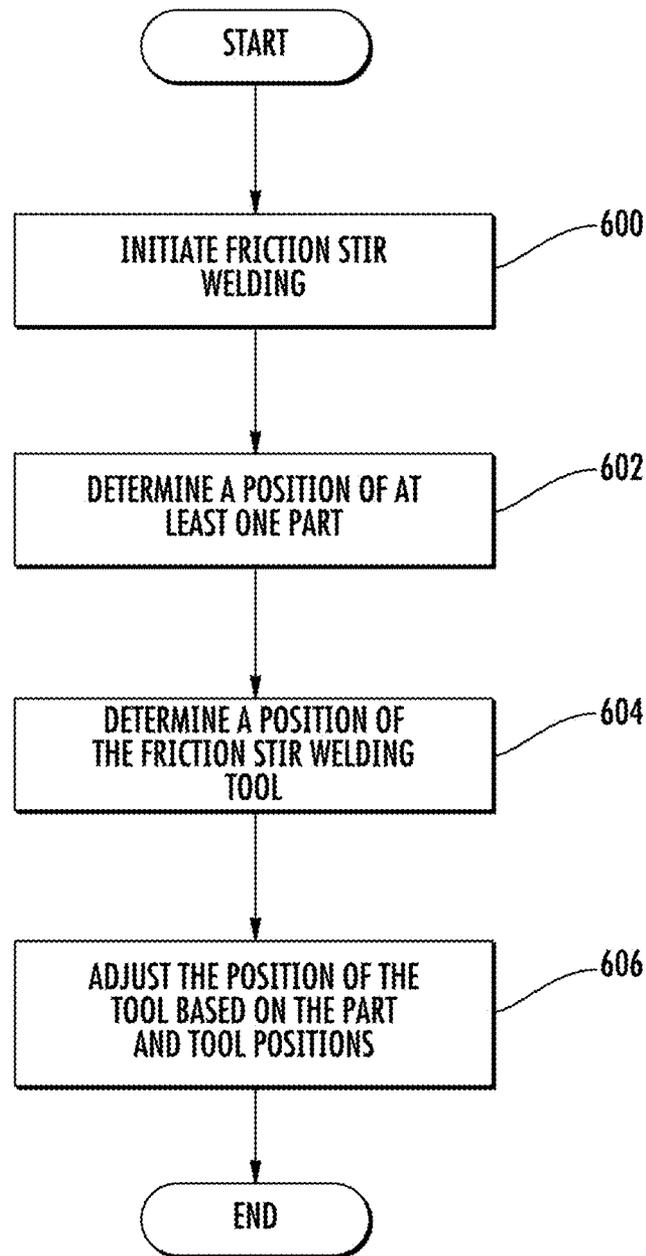


FIG. 11

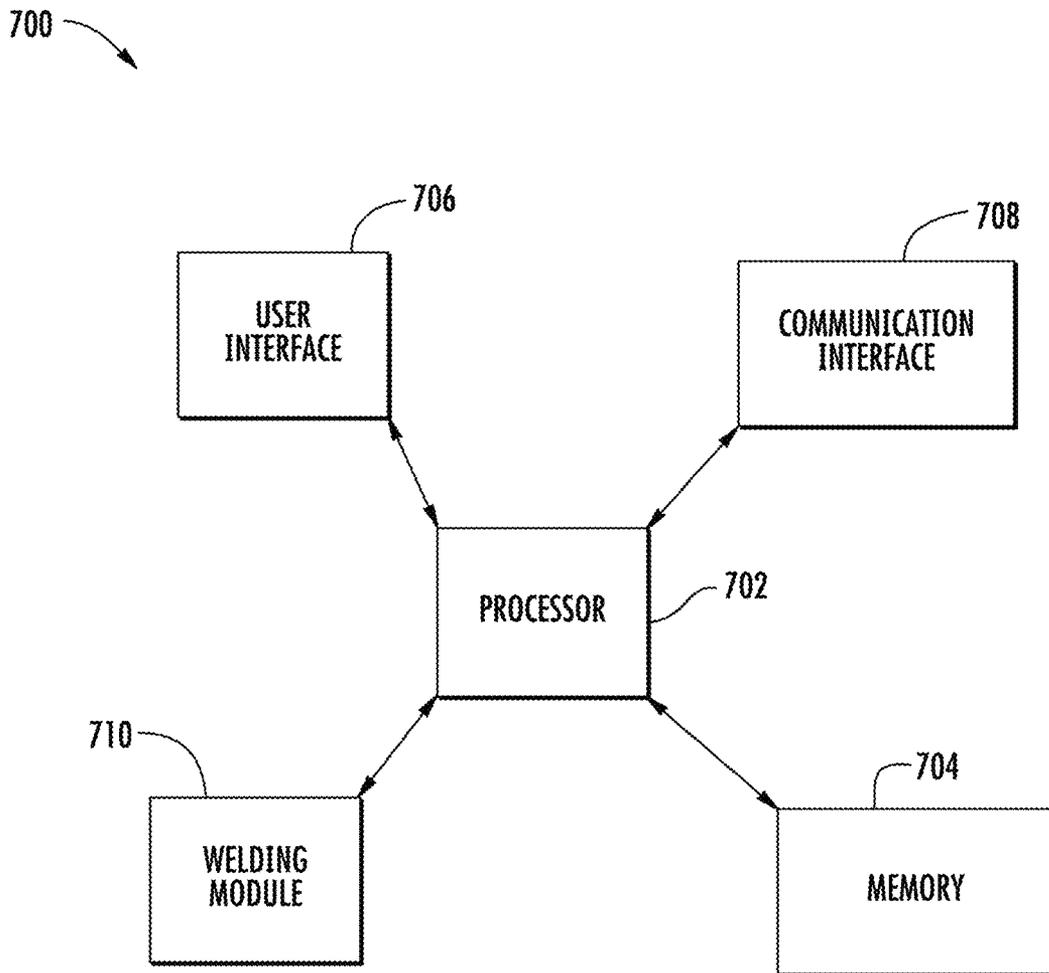


FIG. 12

DYNAMIC PATH CORRECTION OF FRICTION STIR WELDING

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

This application claims the benefit of U.S. Provisional Application No. 61/657,786, filed Jun. 9, 2012, which is entirely incorporated herein by reference.

FIELD OF THE DESCRIBED EMBODIMENTS

The described embodiments relate generally to manufacturing processes and more particularly to controlling a welding operation.

BACKGROUND

Various types of methods and apparatuses have been developed for joining two parts. Example embodiments of methods for joining two parts include adhesive bonding, welding, use of fasteners, etc. In the context of joining certain materials, such as metals, welding has been identified as a suitable method presently in use today.

Various forms of welding methods exist. Example embodiments of welding methods include laser welding, arc welding, gas welding, and friction stir welding. Each type of welding relies on certain differing methods and systems to join parts.

Friction stir welding may present certain advantages over other forms of welding. For example, friction stir welding may not involve heating the parts being welded to as great of an extent as other forms of welding. Further, friction stir welding may not require use of flux or gases which could introduce contaminants into the weld. However, precisely controlling friction stir welding may present certain challenges.

Therefore, improved methods and systems for controlling friction stir welding may be desirable.

SUMMARY

A method for controlling friction stir welding is provided. The method may include initiating friction stir welding and determining the position of a friction stir welding tool and at least one of the parts being friction stir welded. In some embodiments optical sensors may be employed to determine the position of the friction stir welding tool and/or the part(s). However, various other embodiments of sensors may be employed. The position of the friction stir welding tool may be adjusted based on the determined positions of the friction stir welding tool and at least one of the parts.

Accordingly, rather than employing a pre-set path, the friction stir welding tool may be directed along a path that takes into account the actual position of the parts being welded. In this regard, parts may tend to shift positions during friction stir welding. Thus, the resulting weld may be more accurately positioned with respect to the desired position of the weld by dynamically adjusting the position of the friction stir welding tool.

In some embodiments the position of the part(s) may be determined downstream of the friction stir welding tool. Thereby, the position of the friction stir welding tool may be prospectively adjusted based on the positions of the parts. An approximation of the part positions may be based on the determined positions at two or more downstream locations in some embodiments. The approximation may be adjusted to

account for the change in position of the parts as the welding tool moves downstream in some embodiments. This may provide for additional accuracy in forming the weld.

Related systems and computer code for friction stir welding are also provided.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The described embodiments and the advantages thereof may best be understood by reference to the following description taken in conjunction with the accompanying drawings. These drawings in no way limit any changes in form and detail that may be made to the described embodiments by one skilled in the art without departing from the spirit and scope of the described embodiments.

FIG. 1 illustrates a system and method for friction stir welding employing a fixture and friction stir welding tool;

FIG. 2 illustrates a cross-sectional view through the system of FIG. 1 along line 2-2;

FIG. 3 illustrates a cross-sectional view through the system of FIG. 1 along line 2-2 when the friction stir welding tool reaches this location;

FIG. 4 illustrates example results of a friction stir welding operation using conventional path control with a pre-set welding path;

FIG. 5 illustrates a schematic view of a system for friction stir welding including part and tool sensors configured to perform dynamic path correction according to an example embodiment of the present disclosure;

FIG. 6 illustrates an actuator, motor, and friction stir welding tool that may be included in the friction stir welding system of FIG. 5 according to an example embodiment of the present disclosure;

FIG. 7 illustrates an overhead schematic view of a portion of the system of FIG. 5 according to an example embodiment of the present disclosure;

FIG. 8 is an enlarged view of DETAIL 8 from FIG. 7, in which dynamic path correction is illustrated according to an example embodiment of the present disclosure;

FIG. 9 illustrates a partial perspective view of a system for friction stir welding including multiple tool sensors and multiple part sensors configured to perform dynamic path correction according to an example embodiment of the present disclosure;

FIG. 10 illustrates a schematic view of a system for friction stir welding including a sensor mounted to a friction stir welding tool configured to perform dynamic path correction according to an example embodiment of the present disclosure;

FIG. 11 illustrates a method for controlling friction stir welding according to an example embodiment of the present disclosure; and

FIG. 12 illustrates a block diagram of an electronic device according to an example embodiment of the present disclosure.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF SELECTED EMBODIMENTS

Representative applications of methods and apparatus according to the present application are described in this section. These examples are being provided solely to add context and aid in the understanding of the described embodiments. It will thus be apparent to one skilled in the art that the described embodiments may be practiced without some or all of these specific details. In other instances, well known process steps have not been described in detail in order to avoid

unnecessarily obscuring the described embodiments. Other applications are possible, such that the following examples should not be taken as limiting.

In the following detailed description, references are made to the accompanying drawings, which form a part of the description and in which are shown, by way of illustration, specific embodiments in accordance with the described embodiments. Although these embodiments are described in sufficient detail to enable one skilled in the art to practice the described embodiments, it is understood that these examples are not limiting; such that other embodiments may be used, and changes may be made without departing from the spirit and scope of the described embodiments.

Friction stir welding is a method for joining two parts which may present certain advantages over other forms of welding. For example, friction stir welding may not heat the parts being welded to as great of an extent as other forms of welding. In this regard, certain materials may not be able to withstand temperatures associated with other forms of welding. Further, subjecting the parts to high heat may cause the parts to warp. Stresses may also build at the joint as a result of the heat that may eventually lead to failure of the weld.

Additionally, friction stir welding be advantageous in that it may not require use of flux or gases which could introduce contaminants into the weld. Introduction of contaminants into the weld may affect other operations later performed on the parts. For example, it may be more difficult to anodize the parts when contaminants have been introduced into the weld.

Friction-stir welding is a solid-state joining process (meaning the metal is not melted) and may be used in applications where the original metal characteristics must remain unchanged as far as possible. Friction stir welding functions by mechanically intermixing the two pieces of metal at the place of the joint, transforming them into a softened state that allows the metal to be fused using mechanical pressure. This process is primarily used on aluminum, although other materials may be welded, and is most often used on large pieces which cannot be easily heat treated post weld to recover temper characteristics.

FIG. 1 schematically illustrates an example embodiment of the friction stir welding process and system. As illustrated, a first part **100** can be joined to a second part **102** via friction stir welding using a constantly rotated friction stir welding tool **104** including a shoe **106** and a pin **108** extending therefrom. A fixture **110** may be employed to retain the first part **100** and the second part **102** in the desired configuration. As illustrated in FIG. 2, which is a cross-sectional view along line 2-2, the first part **100** and the second part **102** may be configured perpendicularly to one another to form a joint in some embodiments.

As illustrates in FIG. 1, in order to weld the first part **100** and the second part **102** together, the friction stir welding tool **104** may initially be inserted into the joint, for example, by directing the tool downwardly along a path **112**. The friction stir welding tool **104** may then be transversely fed along a path **114** following the desired position of the weld between the first part **100** and the second part **102**. The pin **108** may be slightly shorter than the weld depth required, with the shoe **106** riding atop the work surface.

Frictional heat is generated between the wear-resistant welding components defining the friction stir welding tool **104** and the parts **100**, **102** being welded. This heat, along with that generated by the mechanical mixing process and the adiabatic heat within the material, cause the stirred materials to soften without melting. As the pin **108** is moved forward along the path **114** the plasticized material moves to the rear where clamping force may assist in a forged consolidation the

weld. This process of the friction stir welding tool **104** traversing along the weld line in a plasticized tubular shaft of material may result in severe solid state deformation involving dynamic recrystallization of the base material. After traversing the path **114** at the joint, the friction stir welding tool **104** may be lifted from the material along a path **116**. Accordingly, a weld may be created the first part **100** and the second part **102**.

However, friction stir welding may present certain issues that may make forming a strong and aesthetically pleasing weld difficult. In this regard, friction stir welded parts using a stationary fixture and pre-set (e.g., pre-programmed) tool path may result in an inferior weld joint due in part to the different stresses on the two parts being welded. This is particularly true when a friction stir welding pin traverses a pre-set tool path that does not account for changes in part position.

For example, as illustrated in FIG. 3, an axial force **118** may be applied by the friction stir welding tool along the rotational axis thereof. The axial force **118**, which may be on the order of 2-4 kN (kilo-newtons) in some embodiments, may cause part geometry to change. In this regard, as illustrated in FIG. 3, in some embodiments the fixture **110** may support outer edges **100A**, **102A** of the parts **100**, **102**, while leaving inner edges **100B**, **102B** thereof unsupported. Thus, the inner edges **100B**, **102B** of the parts may bow inwardly away from the fixture **110** when subjected to the axial force **118**, as illustrated.

As a result of movement of one or both of the parts **100**, **102**, a weld created by a tool moved along a pre-set path may be detrimentally affected. For example, if one or both of the parts being welded is no longer in the same position as required by the pre-set path, defects can arise. In this regard, the movement of the parts during friction stir welding may be difficult to predict, and accordingly use of a pre-set path may present issues even when the pre-set path attempts to predict movement of the parts.

FIG. 4 illustrates a view of a weld **200** created by friction stir welding. A desired weld path **202** (e.g., a centerline of the parts) is shown in addition to the actual weld path **204** created by a pre-set weld path. As illustrated, when the desired weld path **202** and the actual weld path **204** of the parts align, a clean weld is produced, for example at position **206**. However, where the desired weld path **202** deviates from the actual weld path **204**, voids, cracks, and/or other defects are produced, for example at position **208**.

Accordingly, embodiments of the present disclosure provided herein are configured to minimize such defects by actively adjusting the path of the tool during movement thereof. For example, FIG. 5 shows a system **300** for friction stir welding using dynamic path correction in accordance with the described embodiments. The system **300** may include a friction stir welding tool **302**, which may be rotated by a motor **304**. The position of the friction stir welding tool **302**, and the motor **304** in some embodiments, may be controlled by an actuator **306**. Thereby, the actuator **306** may displace the friction stir welding tool **302** relative to the parts being welded.

As illustrated in FIG. 6, in one embodiment the actuator **306** may comprise a robotic assembly. For example, the actuator **306** may include one or more arms **308**, one or more joints **310**, and a base **312**. Thus, the arms **308** may be rotated about the joints **310** to position the tool **302** at an appropriate position to friction stir weld. However, various other embodiments of actuators (e.g., gantry systems) may be employed to control the position of the tool **302**.

The friction stir welding system **200** may further comprise a fixture **314**, as illustrated in FIG. 5. The fixture **314** may be configured to hold a first part **316** and a second part **318**. For example, as described above, the fixture **314** may be in contact with an outer surface **316A**, **318A** of at least one of the parts **316**, **318**.

As shown, the system **300** may further comprise one or more sensors **320**, **322**. In one embodiment the sensors **320**, **322** may be mounted to the fixture **314**. The sensors may include a tool sensor **320** configured to determine the position of the friction stir welding tool **302** and a part sensor **322** configured to determine the position of at least one of the first part **316** and the second part **318**. In the illustrated embodiment the tool sensor **320** is configured to measure a distance **324** between the tool sensor and the tool friction stir welding tool **302** and the part sensor **322** is configured to measure a distance **326** between the part sensor and the outer surface **316A** of the first part **316**.

A controller **328** may be in communication with one or more of the motor **304**, the actuator **306**, the tool sensor **320**, and the part sensor **322**. Thereby, the controller **328** may direct operation of one or more of the motor **304** and the actuator **306** and receive information from the sensors **320**, **322**. In this regard, the actuator **306**, the sensors **320**, **322** and the controller **328** may collectively define a path control device configured to control a path traversed by the friction stir welding tool **302** with respect to the first part **316** and the second part **318**.

During operation, the motor **304** rotates the friction stir welding tool **302** and the actuator **306** positions the friction stir welding tool such that the friction stir welding tool friction stir welds the first part **316** to the second part **318**. In one embodiment the controller **328** may instruct the actuator **306** to initially position the friction stir welding tool **302** at a pre-set starting point, and then the friction stir welding tool may begin moving along a pre-set path. However, in another embodiment, the controller **328** may instruct the actuator **306** to initially position the friction stir welding tool **302** at a starting point and then begin moving based on the position of the friction stir welding tool and at least one of the parts **316**, **318** as determined by the sensors **320**, **322**.

Regardless of how the initial starting point is determined, the controller **328** may be configured to instruct the actuator **306** to adjust the position of the friction stir welding tool **302** while friction stir welding the first part **316** to the second part **318** based at least in part on the position of the friction stir welding tool and the position of at least one of the first part and the second part. In this regard, as noted above, the tool sensor **320** may determine the position of the friction stir welding tool **302** by measuring the distance **324** from the tool sensor to the friction stir welding tool and the part sensor **322** may determine the position of at least one of the first part **316** and the second part **318** by measuring the distance **326** from the part sensor to one or both of the parts. The controller **328** may then calculate the relative distance between the friction stir welding tool **302** and at least one of the parts **316**, **318** and instruct the actuator **306** to adjust the position of the friction stir welding tool to more closely align with a desired weld alignment with respect to the parts. For example, the desired weld alignment may correspond to a centerline **330** of the first part **316**, as illustrated. In this regard, the controller **328** may compensate for the width of the friction stir welding tool **302** and the width of the first part **316** in determining where to position the friction stir welding tool.

In order to adjust the position of the friction stir welding tool **302** to more closely align with a desired weld alignment with respect to the parts **316**, **318** (e.g., with the centerline

330), the adjustments may be made reactively, as the friction stir welding tool traverses the length of the parts as they are welded together. In other words, the position of the friction stir welding tool **302** may be adjusted at a location along the path traversed by the friction stir welding tool after the friction stir welding tool reaches the location and the position of the parts **316**, **318** and the friction stir welding tool at that location is determined by the sensors **320**, **322**.

However, rather than reactively adjusting the position of the friction stir welding tool **302**, in another embodiment the path control device may determine the position of the parts **316**, **318** downstream of the friction stir welding tool (e.g., in front of the friction stir welding tool in the welding direction traversed by the friction stir welding tool). Accordingly, the controller **328** may instruct the actuator **306** to adjust the position of the friction stir welding tool **302** to prospectively account for the position of the parts **316**, **318** in front of the friction stir welding tool.

Accordingly, as illustrated in FIG. 7, which is an overhead schematic view of a portion of the system **300**, the system may include a plurality of the part sensors **322** mounted around the perimeter of the parts **316**, **318** being welded. FIG. 8 illustrates an enlarged view of DETAIL 8 from FIG. 7, during friction stir welding. As illustrated, using traditional friction stir welding techniques, the friction stir welding tool **302** may traverse along a pre-set path **332**. However, as noted above, one or both of the parts **316**, **318** may shift position during friction stir welding such that the pre-set path **332** no longer aligns with a center line **330** of the parts (or other desired welding configuration).

Accordingly, the tool sensor **320** may be configured to determine the present position of the friction stir welding tool **302** by measuring the distance **324** between the tool sensor and the friction stir welding tool. Further, the part sensors **322** may be configured to measure the distance **326** between the part sensor and at least one of the parts **316**, **318**. In order to prospectively adjust the position of the friction stir welding tool **302**, the part sensors **322** may determine the position of at least one of the parts **316**, **318** (e.g., the first part in the illustrated embodiment) downstream of the friction stir welding tool. In this regard, arrow **334** illustrates the general direction of travel of the friction stir welding tool **302** and thus points downstream.

In one embodiment a first part sensor **322A** may determine the position of the first part **316** by measuring a distance **326A** to the outer edge **316A** thereof at a first location downstream of the friction stir welding tool **302**. Further, a second part sensor **322B** may determine the position of the first part **316** by measuring a distance **326B** to the outer edge **316A** thereof at a second location downstream of the first location. Accordingly, an approximation of the position of at least one of the parts **316**, **318** may be calculated (e.g., by the controller **328**). In one embodiment the approximation **336** may comprise a linear approximation of the centerline **330** of the parts at the present time. For example, the slope of the linear approximation **336** may be based on the determined positions of at least one of the parts **316**, **318** at the first location and the second location. However, various other approximations may be employed, which may be non-linear (e.g., by approximating the position at three or more downstream locations).

Further, in some embodiments the approximation **336** may be adjusted to determine an expected position of at least one of the first part **316** and the second part **318**. In this regard, the positions of the first part **316** and the second part **318** may shift from their present positions as the friction stir welding tool **302** continues to move downstream. Accordingly, the approximation **336** may be adjusted in some embodiments to

account for the expected position of at least one of the first part **316** and the second part **318** based on factors such as the rigidity of the parts, the response of the parts to heat, empirically determined response to movement of the friction stir welding tool, etc.

However, regardless of whether the approximation **336** is adjusted for the expected position of at least one of the parts **316**, **318**, the approximation may more accurately follow the desired weld path (e.g., the centerline **330**) as compared to a pre-set weld path that does not account for part movement (e.g., pre-set path **332**). Accordingly, a stronger and more aesthetically pleasing weld may be produced. The above-described procedures may be iteratively repeated as the friction stir welding tool **302** moves downstream. Accordingly, the path followed by the friction stir welding tool **302** may be dynamically adjusted while the frictions stir welding tool welds the parts **316**, **318**.

One embodiment of a system **400** in accordance with the present disclosure is illustrated in FIG. **9**, with the actuator, controller, and friction stir welding tool not shown for clarity purposes. As illustrated, the system **400** may include a fixture **402** comprising multiple sections **402A-D**. A corresponding plurality of compression assemblies **404A-D** may be configured to move the portions **402A-D** of the fixture **402** inwardly to compress the parts received therein to assist in the friction stir welding operation. Each of the compression assemblies **404A-D** may be mounted to a respective base in some embodiments. A plurality of tool sensors **408** and a plurality of part position sensors **410** may be mounted to the fixture **402**. The tool sensors **408** may be positioned above the fixture **402** in order to align with the friction stir welding tool, and the part position sensors **410** may be positioned at an inner wall of the fixture **402** in order to align with one or more parts received therein. However, various other systems may be provided that operate in accordance with the present disclosure.

Further, although the embodiments described above generally refer to use of separate tool and part sensors, in an alternate embodiment a sensor may be directly or indirectly mounted to the friction stir welding tool. In this regard, by way of example, FIG. **10** illustrates an embodiment of a system **500** which is substantially similar to the system **300** illustrated in FIG. **5**, except, rather than including separate tool and part sensors, the system includes a sensor **502** mounted to the friction stir welding tool **302**. Thereby, a distance **504** measured between the sensor **502** and at least one of the parts **316**, **318**, may be employed by the controller **328** to determine the relative distance between the friction stir welding tool and at least one of the parts. In this regard, determining the position of the friction stir welding tool **302** and determining the position of at least one of the parts **316**, **318** may be conducted simultaneously in some embodiments, by determining the distance therebetween. However, note that use of separate tool and part sensors may be preferable where it is difficult to position a sensor mounted to the friction stir welding tool in proximity to the parts.

Note also that the various sensors **320**, **322**, **502** described herein may comprise optical sensors in one embodiment. However, various other embodiments of sensors may be employed such as proximity, displacement, transducer, inductive, ultrasonic, capacitive, and magnetic sensors.

A related method for controlling friction stir welding is also provided. As illustrated in FIG. **11**, the method may include initiating friction stir welding of a first part to a second part with a friction stir welding tool at operation **600**. Further, the method may include determining a position of the friction stir welding tool during the friction stir welding at

operation **602**. The method may also include determining a position of at least one of the first part and the second part at operation **604**. Additionally, the method may include adjusting the position of the friction stir welding tool while friction stir welding the first part to the second part based at least in part on the position of the friction stir welding tool and the position of at least one of the first part and the second part at operation **606**.

In some embodiments determining the position of the friction stir welding tool at operation **604** may comprise determining the position of the friction stir welding tool with an optical sensor. Similarly, determining the position of at least one of the first part and the second part at operation **602** may comprise determining the position of at least one of the first part and the second part with an optical sensor. Further, determining the position of at least one of the first part and the second part at operation **602** may comprise determining the position of at least one of the first part and the second part downstream of the friction stir welding tool. Determining the position of at least one of the first part and the second part downstream of the friction stir welding tool may comprise determining the position of at least one of the first part and the second part at a first location downstream of the friction stir welding tool and at a second location downstream of the first location.

The method may additionally include calculating an approximation of the position of at least one of the first part and the second part. Calculating the approximation may comprise calculating a linear approximation of the position of at least one of the first part and the second part. Further, the method may include adjusting the approximation to determine an expected position of at least one of the first part and the second part when the friction stir welding tool reaches the first location.

FIG. **12** is a block diagram of an electronic device **600** suitable for use with the described embodiments. In one example embodiment the electronic device **600** may be embodied in or as the controller **328** for a friction stir welding system. In this regard, the electronic device **600** may be configured to control or execute the above-described friction stir welding operations.

The electronic device **700** illustrates circuitry of a representative computing device. The electronic device **700** may include a processor **702** that may be microprocessor or controller for controlling the overall operation of the electronic device **700**. In one embodiment the processor **702** may be particularly configured to perform the functions described herein. The electronic device **700** may also include a memory device **704**. The memory device **704** may include non-transitory and tangible memory that may be, for example, volatile and/or non-volatile memory. The memory device **704** may be configured to store information, data, files, applications, instructions or the like. For example, the memory device **704** could be configured to buffer input data for processing by the processor **702**. Additionally or alternatively, the memory device **704** may be configured to store instructions for execution by the processor **702**.

The electronic device **700** may also include a user interface **706** that allows a user of the electronic device **700** to interact with the electronic device. For example, the user interface **706** can take a variety of forms, such as a button, keypad, dial, touch screen, audio input interface, visual/image capture input interface, input in the form of sensor data, etc. Still further, the user interface **706** may be configured to output information to the user through a display, speaker, or other output device. A communication interface **708** may provide for transmitting and receiving data through, for example, a

wired or wireless network such as a local area network (LAN), a metropolitan area network (MAN), and/or a wide area network (WAN), for example, the Internet.

The electronic device 700 may also include a welding module 710. The processor 702 may be embodied as, include or otherwise control the welding module 710. The welding module 710 may be configured for controlling friction stir welding operations.

The various aspects, embodiments, implementations or features of the described embodiments can be used separately or in any combination. Various aspects of the described embodiments can be implemented by software, hardware or a combination of hardware and software. The described embodiments can also be embodied as computer readable code on a computer readable medium for controlling machining operations. In this regard, a computer readable storage medium, as used herein, refers to a non-transitory, physical storage medium (e.g., a volatile or non-volatile memory device, which can be read by a computer system. Examples of the computer readable medium include read-only memory, random-access memory, CD-ROMs, DVDs, magnetic tape, and optical data storage devices. The computer readable medium can also be distributed over network-coupled computer systems so that the computer readable code is stored and executed in a distributed fashion.

The foregoing description, for purposes of explanation, used specific nomenclature to provide a thorough understanding of the described embodiments. However, it will be apparent to one skilled in the art that the specific details are not required in order to practice the described embodiments. Thus, the foregoing descriptions of specific embodiments are presented for purposes of illustration and description. They are not intended to be exhaustive or to limit the described embodiments to the precise forms disclosed. It will be apparent to one of ordinary skill in the art that many modifications and variations are possible in view of the above teachings.

What is claimed is:

1. A method for controlling a friction stir welding operation, the method comprising:

initiating friction stir welding of a first part to a second part with a friction stir welding tool along a welding path, the welding path corresponding to a junction between the first part and the second part;

determining a position of the friction stir welding tool during the friction stir welding;

determining a position of at least one of the first part and the second part, downstream of the friction stir welding tool; predicting an amount of lateral displacement of the junction with respect to the welding path using at least the determined positions; and

dynamically correcting the welding path of the friction stir welding tool while friction stir welding the first part to the second part to account for the predicted lateral displacement of the junction with respect to the welding path during the welding operation.

2. The method of claim 1, wherein determining the position of the friction stir welding tool comprises determining the position of the friction stir welding tool with one or more sensors.

3. The method of claim 1, wherein determining the position of at least one of the first part and the second part comprises determining the position of at least one of the first part and the second part with one or more optical sensors.

4. The method of claim 1, wherein determining the position of at least one of the first part and the second part downstream

of the friction stir welding tool comprises determining the position of at least one of the first part and the second part at a first location downstream of the friction stir welding tool and at a second location downstream of the first location.

5. The method of claim 4, further comprising calculating an approximation of the position of at least one of the first part and the second part.

6. The method of claim 5, wherein calculating the approximation comprises calculating a linear approximation of the position of at least one of the first part and the second part.

7. The method of claim 5, further comprising adjusting the approximation to determine an expected position of at least one of the first part and the second part when the friction stir welding tool reaches the first location.

8. The method as recited in claim 2, wherein the one or more sensors comprise an optical sensor mounted to the friction stir welding tool.

9. The method as recited in claim 3, wherein the one or more sensors comprise an optical sensor.

10. The method as recited in claim 2, further comprising: constraining the first and second parts with a fixture, wherein the one or more sensors comprise a plurality of sensors mounted to the fixture.

11. The method as recited in claim 3, further comprising: periodically tracking a position of the friction stir welding tool during a friction stir welding operation with the one or more sensors that are distributed proximate to the welding path of the friction stir welding tool.

12. The method as recited in claim 2, wherein the one or more sensors comprise a tool sensor configured to determine the position of the friction stir welding tool and a part sensor configured to determine the position of at least one of the first part and the second part.

13. A method for guiding a friction stir welding tool during a friction stir welding operation, the method comprising:

providing a welding path to the friction stir welding tool, the welding path corresponding to a junction between a first part and a second part prior to applying the friction stir welding operation to join the first and second parts along the junction;

detecting a position of a portion of the first part downstream of the friction stir welding tool using at least an optical sensor;

predicting an amount of lateral movement of the junction with respect to the welding path using at least the detected position; and

dynamically adjusting the welding path of the friction stir welding tool during the friction stir welding operation in accordance with the predicted lateral movement.

14. The method as recited in claim 13, wherein the optical sensor is coupled to a fixture operable to support at least one of the first and the second part during the friction stir welding operation.

15. The method as recited in claim 13, wherein the detected portion of the first part is downstream of a position of the friction stir welding tool.

16. The method as recited in claim 13, further comprising: detecting a position of the friction stir welding tool, wherein the predicting is also based on the detected position of the friction stir welding tool.

17. The method as recited in claim 13, wherein the friction stir welding tool is guided by a robotic assembly configured to receive instructions for dynamically adjusting the welding path.